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A Religious Interpretation of the American Civil War as Evidenced by Biblical Language in Songs and Hymns

Abstract

Both Union and Confederate soldiers claimed the same moral confidence about being on the right side of the American Civil War. Significant studies have evaluated the religiosity of the Civil War, but the religious content of songs and hymns, namely their use of biblical language has not been studied for the insight into a religious interpretation of the war they provide. Because the moral claims appear in songs and hymns and utilize biblical language to interpret the conflict, their role in the war, and the expected outcome, this research is important to provide a full understanding of religion's role in the Civil War. This paper argues that the biblical language in Civil War era songs and hymns, both as borrowed biblical vocabulary and as textual and narrative allusions, reveals a religious interpretation of the war. The findings of this survey analysis show that both sides claimed God's providence, believing He was active in the world, fighting for His people, bringing justice and peace, guarding and delivering, providing safety and victory. Both sides viewed their fighting as righteous and overcoming evil. This research provides greater insight into the religious dimensions of the Civil War and broadens our understanding of how the nation comprehended the conflict that divided these people.

Keywords

United States, history, Civil War, moral aspects, religious aspects, music, songs, hymns, biblical language

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A Religious Interpretation of the American Civil War as Evidenced by Biblical Language in Songs and Hymns

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History and Government

Introduction

The claims, “God’s on our side” and “Secure in God’s almighty name, our confidence remains” are explicitly religious lyrics. Civil War songs and hymns claimed confidence in a God who fought on their side in the national conflict. But without the rest of the song, one would find it difficult to identify which claim belonged to the Union and which belonged to the Confederacy. Soldiers on both sides claimed the same theological confidence and identity, interpreting the Civil War in biblical terms. The use of biblical language in these songs provides insight to the religious lens through which Americans understood the conflict, their role in war, and the anticipated outcome. This study argues that the nature of biblical language used in Civil War era songs and hymns, both as borrowed biblical vocabulary and as textual and narrative allusions, reveals a religious interpretation of the war.

Following the methodology, this paper will include a survey of the historical and religious background of the Civil War. While the focus of this paper is not on the history, a historical and theological background of the Civil War will be necessary to properly analyze biblical language within these song lyrics. After examining the general use of songs during the war, a few songs and hymns will be analyzed to reveal the nature and function of the biblical language. Presented after each song will be a summary regarding the religious interpretation of the war that is demonstrated by the use of biblical language.

Methodology

Approach

The methodological approach and organization will fairly and accurately represent the function of biblical language in Civil War songs and hymns. The nature of this research will be a survey of the lyrics in these Civil War songs. A varied selection of songs will be used to gain a broad understanding of the scope of biblical language use. Biblical language connections will be limited to the exact words, and the primary comparative text will be the Authorized King James Version of the English Bible. Because of the focus on words, concepts will not be considered apart from exact wording. Other musical elements of songs and hymns will also not be the object of study. This survey-like approach is similar to a study done by Peter Wood and Emma Wild-Wood, in which they

surveyed a number of Anglican hymns sung in Congo.¹ Their survey utilized a topical and thematic analysis of the content of a number of songs. Although the method of analysis will be different, the survey style used here will be very similar to their research. .

The meaning or intention behind the use of biblical language in these songs will first be examined within the song or hymn itself. The lyrics will contribute to understanding why the author used the biblical reference before the context of the biblical reference is examined. Thereafter, the context of the reference within the relevant biblical text will be considered. This will keep the biblical context from being imported to the meaning of the song in a way that might not have been intended.

The songs analyzed are from the Library of Congress online collection of Civil War sheet music.² All sources selected were associated with either the Union or the Confederacy and have been identified by the Library of Congress as having “religious aspects,” with the exception of “The Battle-Cry of Freedom,” which is included because of its popularity and because it was rewritten for both the Union and the Confederacy.³ Some of the songs use the word “hymn” in their title and others do not, thus the broader category of “songs and hymns.”

Defining Terms

It is appropriate to categorize the different ways that biblical language functions within these Civil War songs. This is a challenge because no form of categorization will be perfect. In fact, there are occasions where an appearance of biblical language may share the characteristics of more than one of the following categories. Nevertheless, such categories are a helpful and necessary tool to analyze the way that the lyrics reference the Bible.

This research evaluates two major categories in which biblical language is used in these songs: borrowed language and biblical allusions. The latter category is broken into two sections, textual allusions and narrative allusions. The greatest distinction between these two categories is whether the song refers back to a specific passage or verse within the Bible or if the song pulls from general language that is throughout the Bible without making a clear claim to a single passage or verse. As said earlier, there will be occasions of overlap, specifically between borrowed biblical language and textual allusions.

Borrowed language is further defined here as the occasions where key vocabulary within the biblical text are used in the lyrics. For example, songs might use the words “righteous” or “holy” to define the actions of the Union or Confederacy. This language is used throughout the Bible, and these words contribute to the overall meaning of the song. Because borrowed language rarely makes an explicit reference to any one verse in the Bible, the category demonstrates the generally interwoven language of the Bible with an interpretation of the Civil War.

Textual allusions are defined as references to specific texts, phrases or verses. This category is the most difficult to identify and define because of its similarity to borrowed language. Textual allusions are distinct from borrowed language, however, because they contain more than individual words, and reference the broader message of specific texts. Borrowed vocabulary may appear in

¹ Peter Wood and Emma Wild-Wood, “‘One Day We Will Sing in God’s Home’: Hymns and Songs Sung in the Anglican Church in North-East Congo,” *Journal of Religion in Africa*, (2004): 145-80.

² <https://www.loc.gov/collections/civil-war-sheet-music/?fa=subject:religious+aspects>

³ Edward C. Spann, “Hymns and the Civil War,” *Baptist History & Heritage*, 80.

the form of a short phrase, but textual allusions generally use a short phrase to allude to an entire text. For example, one song uses the phrase, “Majesty on high,” which is a phrase only used once in the Bible, in Hebrews 1:3. The effectiveness of textual allusions are similar to that of borrowed language in that it demonstrates the use of biblical texts to understand or explain the war, but unlike borrowed language, textual allusions supply a broader set of biblical ideas taken from a specific text.

Narrative allusions are defined as references to specific stories within the biblical text. This category may be the easiest to identify within songs because they are fairly explicit and usually are significant in the song itself. For example, there are general references to the story of Moses leading Israel through the Red Sea. These allusions are significant because they demonstrate that soldiers identified with biblical characters and events within the immediate historical context of the Civil War. These allusions are used to justify actions and to interpret the outcome of current events.

Identifying various ways that the Bible was used in songs and hymns is not unique to this research. Randall McElwain conducted a similar study on hymns written by Charles Wesley.⁴ In his study, McElwain also breaks down the usage of the Bible in these hymns into three categories. He identifies “Incidental scriptural allusions” as casual usage of biblical language that correspond with specific passages but reflect an author whose mind was so filled with the Bible that it poured out into the lyrics—a subconscious usage.⁵ This category is helpful but not translatable here because my research does not address the authors of these songs and hymns. Second, McElwain identifies “Intertextual use of scripture” in hymns, which was a conscious usage of the biblical text to interpret and echo it in the hymn.⁶ The songs studied for this essay do not seem to interpret the text or to echo the overall Bible, but rather to use the text to interpret their current events. So McElwain’s category of intertextual use does not fully relate either. Lastly, McElwain identifies a “sermonic development of biblical texts,” which are the occasions where Charles Wesley “preaches” through his hymn.⁷ Although there are occasions when the songs and hymns studied here apply the biblical narratives to the current events, it does not appear that these are meant to act in a sermonic way. Even though the categories McElwain identifies are not translatable to my study, they are still helpful in affirming the validity of such categories in general. Biblical texts are used in a variety of ways in songs and hymns and categorizing them is helpful in evaluating the function of these references.

Historical and Religious Background

The Civil War brought turmoil and bloodshed to the young nation that had never felt it before. Disagreement had built until it erupted, dividing the country, states, and even families. Was it right for the South to leave? Was it right for the North to make them stay? Was it right to allow slavery? Was a war the right solution? The question of “who is right?” added to the division as both the

⁴ Randall D. McElwain, “Biblical Language in the Hymns of Charles Wesley,” *Wesley and Methodist Studies* (2009): 55-70.

⁵ Ibid. 58-59.

⁶ Ibid. 60-63.

⁷ Ibid. 63-69.

Union and the Confederacy claimed the same, mutually exclusive, moral ground as the right side of the war.

This moral question in the Civil War has led scholars to study the role of religion in America before and during the war. They have sought to determine how religious beliefs influenced the decisions of people and their confidence in being right during a time of incredible conflict and division. Scholars have also studied the function of songs and hymns during the Civil War. These songs were sung at strategic moments and expressed an understanding of the events surrounding the people, especially soldiers.

Americans' religious beliefs played a substantial role in the sectional debate leading to the Civil War. In fact, the proportion of Americans who participated in religious bodies was significantly higher in the decades before the Civil War than today, and evangelical Christianity constituted the dominant religious culture in the country.⁸ Americans were not just involved in the Christian culture, they cared deeply, and the primary concern for many individuals was their eternal salvation and the proper outworking of their actions.⁹ The Civil War, however, did not mark the beginning of the interweaving of religion and current events. Since the early influence of the Puritans on the nation, many understood happenings in their world as instruments of God, either as blessings or judgments.¹⁰ This influence did not wane, and even when the Civil War began, Evangelical Protestantism affected how Americans viewed their world.¹¹ When the conflict erupted in war, people looked to their preachers for guidance in how to respond, wanting confidence that they were among the right.¹²

Before the war began, the general public believed that God was in some way at work in their world. Providentialism encompassed the beliefs that God acted to reward or punish nations, to use a nation for the better of the world, or to combat evil on a cosmic scale.¹³ War was one of the ways God worked in the world to bring progress or judgment. Themes about believers involved in a great battle of good versus evil trace back again to the Puritans.¹⁴ Beliefs about the end of the world impacted how Americans interpreted events and connected ideas they otherwise did not understand.¹⁵ The Civil War proposed a question, "What is God doing in this?" Postmillennial convictions and a belief in Christ's soon return influenced how people drew conclusions about geopolitical changes and warfare.¹⁶ At the same time, people began to read and interpret the Bible

⁸ Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 11-12.

⁹ James W. Silver, *Confederate Morale & Church Propaganda*, (New York: Norton & Company, 1957), 25.

¹⁰ Larry Witham, *A City Upon a Hill: How Sermons Changed the Course of American History*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 38-39.

¹¹ April Holm, *A Kingdom Divided: Evangelicals, Loyalty, and Sectionalism in the Civil War Era*, (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 2017), 3.

¹² Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, 1.

¹³ Ben Wright and Zachary W. Dresser, *Apocalypse and the Millennium in the American Civil War*, (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 2013), 4.

¹⁴ Witham, *A City Upon a Hill*, 3 & Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, 18.

¹⁵ Matthew Avery Sutton, *American Apocalypse: a History of Modern Evangelicalism*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 4.

¹⁶ Sutton, *American Apocalypse*, 3.

more for themselves, turning away from authorities on Bible interpretation.¹⁷ Perhaps this offers a reason how both sides could make the same moral claims from the Bible that could not both be true.

These religious beliefs influenced how many Americans understood war. In fact, religion gave war in America a sort of purpose, where churches were “asserting divine blessing and pleading for divine deliverance and triumph.”¹⁸ Specifically, during the Civil War, churches and church leaders held incredible positions of influence. It is estimated that half of the southern clergy took on additional roles for the war effort such as chaplains or hospital workers, believing that contributing to the success of the Confederacy meant working as a chosen instrument of God for His divine plan in the nation.¹⁹ Church leaders not only taught but modeled that religion and society were related.

Lincoln’s “A Kingdom Divided” speech may be one of the most famous biblical reference examples during the Civil War. April Holm discusses the nature of Lincoln’s citation of Matthew 12:25 in her book, *A Kingdom Divided*. She claims that the listeners would have immediately recognized the textual reference as a citation from Scripture.²⁰ Lincoln’s use of this passage and its reception show that Americans saw their nation as one that “embodied the divine promise of a kingdom of God on earth.”²¹ Even Lincoln’s second inaugural address “drew on Puritan oratory, the jeremiad, and themes from biblical texts in Psalms and Matthew.”²² Such usage of biblical language reveals a religious way of interpreting the Civil War.

Religion and clergy helped the nation understand the war and what their moral obligations were, but songs and hymns also played a role in the Civil War. War has a tendency to cause religious reflection, especially in hymns.²³ Edward Spann argues that “During the classic struggle of the Civil War, the hymn was a most important form of music in America.”²⁴ These songs affected the soldiers and stirred within them hope, bravery, patriotism, and comfort.²⁵ James Davis also studied the relationship between music and gallantry during the Civil War. He concludes that soldiers needed courage to survive and succeed and that soldiers believed that the outcome of the war was substantially impacted by the unified courage in their companies.²⁶ The words of these songs were important, and there were occasions where chaplains tweaked lyrics for specific situations soldiers encountered.²⁷ There are even cases where both sides sang the same songs, changing only a few words, as in the case of “The Battle-Cry of Freedom.”²⁸ These songs included genuine beliefs about

¹⁷ Robert J. Miller, *Both Prayed to the Same God: Religion and Faith in the American Civil War*, (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007), 43-44.

¹⁸ Harry S. Stout, “Review Essay: Religion, War, and the Meaning of America,” *Religion & American Culture*, 275, 284.

¹⁹ Silver, *Confederate Morale & Church Propaganda*, 25, 77-78.

²⁰ Holm, *A Kingdom Divided*, 16.

²¹ Holm, *A Kingdom Divided*, 16.

²² Witham, *A City Upon a Hill*, 143.

²³ Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, 15.

²⁴ Spann, “Hymns and the Civil War,” 78.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 81, 84-85.

²⁶ James A. Davis, “Music and Gallantry in Combat During the American Civil War,” *American Music*, 142-143.

²⁷ Spann, “Hymns and the Civil War,” 79.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 80.

“God and the Right” in the context of their war.²⁹ And they “publicized chivalric imagery alongside ideological propaganda.”³⁰ Songs and hymns provide helpful insight to the religious interpretations of the war, as the Union and the Confederacy both sought to be the morally right.

Analysis of Songs and Hymns

Borrowed Language

Given the definition of borrowed biblical language as occasions where key vocabulary within the biblical text are used in the lyrics, this section will analyze songs and hymns and demonstrate the religious interpretation of the Civil War.

“The Soldier’s Prayer”³¹

“The Soldier’s Prayer” was associated with the Union and its main idea is the prayer of a soldier asking for God to protect him and provide courage for the fight. Because this song is a prayer, the religious character is evident throughout the song. There are, however, a few specific points that demonstrate borrowed biblical language.

The soldier calls on the “God of battles” to hear his cry. Characterizing God as one who fights battles occurs throughout the Old Testament, in the Law, Prophets, and the Writings. It also occurs once in the New Testament, in Revelation. In Deuteronomy 20:1, God goes out to battle against the enemies of Israel and to protect His people. God is characterized in a similar way in 1 Chronicles 14:15 and 2 Chronicles 20:15, where God is the one fighting the battles on behalf of His people. The description of God as the one who fights for His people is used in this song as the Union soldiers pray for protection and courage. The use of biblical language demonstrates that participants viewed God as a key character in the Civil War. He had a position of power both to wage war and protect individual soldiers, and the Union calls on God to act as a powerful ally in the war.

The song also says, “If we fall, oh, gather in to heavenly land, where peace, kind angel, reigneth ever.” The context of this line in the song is the request for God to keep the soldiers safe in His hands. The idea of God “gathering” his people occurs throughout the Psalms. For example, Psalm 106:47 links the idea of being gathered by God with being saved and protected by Him. Using the biblical language of being “gathered” by God shows that these soldiers prayed for safety. As they fought the tragic and bloody battles of the Civil War, their hope to continue was grounded in the hand of God.

“God! And our Native Land!”³²

This anthem describes the reaction of the Union to the beginning of the war—their rising up to fight for God and for their land. Their goal was liberty and maintaining the union, to “conquer or die.” They resisted tyranny and called on all their countrymen to join them. They joined in the efforts of

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Davis, “Music and Gallantry,” 163.

³¹ Joseph Dunbar, *The Soldier’s Prayer*, (New York: C. M. Tremaine, 1867) Notated Music.

³² A. Lemuel Adams and Wm. B Thomas, *God! And Our Native Land, a New National Anthem* (Philadelphia: Lee & Walker, 1863) Notated Music.

George Washington as they fought and showed that their cause united “right and might.” Aside from the motif throughout the song, “God! And our Native Land!” there are a couple of specific instances where biblical language seems to be borrowed.

“For in this war, we strike for liberty.” Liberty is not an unfamiliar word in American history, but here it is used within the context of the Civil War and the cry to fight for God and the land. Liberty is a unique part of the prophetic writings concerning the coming of the Messiah. In Isaiah 61:1, the Messianic figure is going to “proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound.” The idea of “proclaiming liberty throughout all the land” is also present in Leviticus 25 where God instructs Moses about the result of the year of jubilee. The liberty in the land would apply to all its inhabitants.³³ Another example of this language is in Jeremiah 34:14-17, where God tells Israel that what is right in his sight is “proclaiming liberty every man to his neighbor.” This song claims that liberty for the “son of toil” and for the “man’s birthright” is their aim. The borrowed biblical language shows how the Union soldiers understood their mission in terms of biblical liberty for captives and for the land. The Civil War was not just a fight to free slaves, the Union was fighting for biblically defined liberty, which they saw as right in God’s eyes. The use of the word “banner” in the last verse is another unique example of borrowed language. The song says, “Then strike the drum, the banner wave to lead our warriors on to victory, or the hero’s grave.” The word “banner” is used two times in Psalms, three times in Songs of Solomon, and once in Isaiah.³⁴ The banner is part of the section that declares that the Union is both right and mighty, that this banner is part of their preparation to win or die as heroes. In Psalms, “banner” is associated with the salvation of God. Twice in Songs of Solomon, it is used in the description of a “terrible army.” In Isaiah, the banner is part of the description of the Lord of hosts gathering together a people for battle to “destroy the whole land.” It seems this uncommon phrase in the Bible was borrowed to describe the people preparing for a battle that was intimately related to God Himself. As the Union went forth, they saw their actions consistent with the work of God.

“God Save the Land”³⁵

“Great God, all just, all wise, on whom our trust relies. To Thee our nation cries, God save the land! Charge it with patriot fire, guard it from faction dire and from rebellion’s ire. God Save the Land!” The religious nature of this song is undeniable, and the song claims its hope in God to guard them from dividing their land. Emphasizing the land in this song shows the Union believed that the war was caused by the Confederacy seceding from the Union. The phrase “great God” will be emphasized below as borrowed biblical language.

The expression, “great God,” occurs eight times in the Bible.³⁶ In Deuteronomy 10:17, God is described as above all, great, mighty, and worthy of Israel’s obedience. In Ezra 5:8, the phrase is used in the context of describing the temple. In Nehemiah 8:6, Ezra reads the Bible and blesses the Lord, describing Him as “the great God.” In Psalm 95:3, the Lord is described as “a great God” above all. In Proverbs 26:10, “the great God” is the one who created all things. In Daniel 2:45, “the great

³³ Lev. 25:10

³⁴ “Banner” is also used in militia regalia, but this song sets sufficient precedence for this reference to be seen as a borrowed biblical vocabulary. Psalm 20:5, 60:4; Song of Solomon 2:4, 6:4, 6:10; Isaiah 13:2.

³⁵ Hilton J. Jones, *God Save the Land*, (New York: William Hall & Son. 1861) Notated Music.

³⁶ The Authorized KJV of the English Bible.

God” is the one who enabled the king’s dream to be interpreted. Finally, in Titus 2:13, the coming of the “great God” in the form of Jesus Christ brings salvation.

This borrowed title of God highlights His supremacy. The soldier’s declared their trust in a great God, and they called on Him to act on their behalf. They relied on God to guard and deliver them. The borrowed phrase, “great God,” seems to highlight the Union’s believed God was mighty and would act accordingly during the Civil War conflict. This belief is consistent with the usage of the phrase in the Bible. The North fought to protect the nation from division assuming that God not only sanctioned their actions, but also worked on their side.

“God Save the South!”³⁷

In this song, the South prays for what they want God to do, namely save them. But the song also describes what God has already done, claiming that He will continue to act accordingly. It then claims to justify the actions of the South in the Civil War.

“God be our shield, at home or afield. Stretch thine arm over us, strengthen and save.” The South asks God to intervene and aide the Confederacy, to protect and save. One particular phrase is borrowed from the Bible, and that is the language of God being a “shield.” In Psalm 33:19-20, the psalmist hopes in the Lord to deliver him from death. His soul hopes in the Lord because God is his “help and shield.” In Psalm 59:8-11, the psalmist describes God slaying his enemies and being his own defense, specifically calling the Lord his “shield.” Psalm 84:8-12 describes the blessing that comes from God to His people because he is their “shield.” The song borrows this language and uses it similarly to how it is used in Scripture. Using this language shows that the soldiers interpreted that God would intervene on behalf of those whom He shields in the war. The South relied on God to defend them in their fight to secede.

“God made the right stronger than the might...Let the proud spoiler know, God’s on our side.” The evidence for this example of borrowed language is not as simple as ones previously mentioned, but the connection is still significant. The use of the word “right” to refer to a particular side is similar to the use of the “righteous” in the Bible, specifically in the Psalms when the righteous and wicked are contrasted. Over and over, the righteous are blessed and given life, while the wicked are judged and destroyed.³⁸ In these Psalms alone, the righteous win over the wicked, and the use of “the right” here seems to draw from this language. The Confederacy identified with the righteous and anticipated God acting on their behalf and granting victory to them. The song also claims that “Rebel’s the righteous name Washington bore.” This further corresponds with the South seeing themselves as the “right” and connects to the Revolutionary War. They considered their actions in the Civil War, not only in line with historical actions of the country, but also morally righteous according to Scripture.

“The Cross of the South”³⁹

Metaphors for the South’s struggle as a fight for peace, justice, and victory fill this song. The overarching metaphor for the struggle itself is “the Cross of the South,” which is repeated throughout the song. The idea of equating the burden, mission, and duty of these people as a “cross”

³⁷ Chas. W.A. Ellerbrock and Earnest Halphin, *God Save the South!* (1863) Notated Music.

³⁸ Psalm 1:5-6; 5:12; 7:9; 11:5; 34:15, 17, 19, 21; 37:21, 29, 39; 69:28; 92:12, 125:3; 146:8.

³⁹ *The Cross of the South*. 1861. Notated Music.

is borrowed from the New Testament, specifically the Gospels. The song characterizes their cross as something that will remain forever and result in freedom and glory. This cross will be marked by the triumph and victory of the brave. In Matthew 10:38, Jesus gives instructions to the twelve disciples and tells them that whoever does not take up their own cross is not worthy of following Him. Similarly, in Matthew 16:24, Jesus tells his disciples again that if someone wanted to follow Him, they must take up their cross. In Mark 10:21, the one who takes up their cross and follows Jesus also receives treasure in heaven. These are the instances where the use of the “cross” matches that of “The Cross of the South.” Combined with a narrative allusion that will be discussed later, it seems as if the song borrows the “cross” vocabulary to relate their fight to their spiritual duty of following Jesus Christ. Following Christ connected to fighting for the Confederacy and would result in triumph and victory.

“The Battle-Cry of Freedom”⁴⁰

This particular song has a unique story in and of itself. The song was sung by both the Union and the Confederacy, with the lyrics being tweaked for each side. Both songs are highly patriotic and act as rallying calls for soldiers and the “battle-cry of freedom” served as the heart cry of both versions. The Confederate version utilizes the word “cross” to describe their position and side in the war. It says, “The Dixie forever,⁴¹ she’s never at loss—Down with the eagle, up with the cross.” Here, the Union is personified as the “eagle” and the Confederacy is personified as the “cross.” The use of borrowed language involving the cross was evaluated in the previous song, “The Cross of the South.” Although not as explicit in this song, it seems as if the borrowed biblical language still connects a divine duty and the fight of the South. The contrast between the two versions highlight the way that the South saw their actions as Christian. The cross emphasizes their desire to follow Christ by fighting this war.

“God and Our Union, the Anthem of Freedom”⁴²

“Grateful and loyal, our anthem shall be, ‘God and our Union!—the Hope of the Free!’” This is the anthem’s chorus. This song includes several occasions of borrowed biblical language and references to the Revolutionary War as a sort of proof text to interpret the work of God in the Civil War they fought. This song declares that George Washington now dwells with the angels who counsel the Union to reject the South’s attempts to secede. Washington is “sainted in glory” and rejoices when the nation is unified. “Sainted in glory” is borrowed from the Bible, where believers are described (Ephesians 1:18). The borrowed biblical language shows the Union soldiers believed the war carried out the desires and efforts from the Revolution, specifically those of George Washington, who is described the same way as believers in the Bible. By fighting the Civil War, the Union continues the work of Washington’s own Christian work in the Revolution.

This song also says that that “God was their Guide” and made them strong to triumph over their oppressors. The language is borrowed from Psalm 48:14, where God guides His people forever,

⁴⁰ Hermann L. Schriener and William H. Barnes, *The Battle-Cry of Freedom*, (Macon & Savannah: J. C. Schreiner & Son, 1864) Notated Music.

⁴¹ In contrast to “The Union forever” in the Union version of the lyrics. George F. Root, *The Battle-Cry of Freedom*, (Chicago: Root & Cady, 1862) Notated Music.

⁴² Leopold Meignen and Louis Dela, *God and Our Union, the Anthem of Freedom*. (Philadelphia: Beck & Lawton, 1860) Notated Music.

even until death. This shows that the Union soldiers believed their fighting was guided by God. He was leading the Union to triumph, even if the soldiers died.

The Union claims “plotters of treason, as just retribution, merit thy wrath and the vengeance of Heaven.” The relationship of God and vengeance occurs several times in the Bible, for example in Deuteronomy 32:35. “Wrath” and “heaven” are also specifically linked in several places (Isaiah 13:13; Romans 1:18). This borrowed biblical language demonstrates the soldiers believed the war was a way to bring divine vengeance on the wicked as they saw it, the treacherous South. They believed that, as the Civil War raged, God was pouring out His divine wrath on the Confederacy for their treason against the nation.

The lyrics also use the expression “Hosanna!” which is found in the Gospels (Matthew 21:9, 15; Mark 11:9, 10; John 12:13). “Hosanna” is used in these passages to praise God and express the Union’s hope. “Hosanna” opens the anthem as the soldiers declare their hope in God and the Union. This borrowed biblical language links their hope in God and their efforts in the war to bring freedom. Their actions in the Civil War are interwoven with their worship of God.

Textual Allusions

Given the method and definition of textual allusions as references to specific texts, phrases, or verses, this section will analyze songs and hymns to demonstrate the religious interpretation of the Civil War.

“Glory to God in the Highest!”⁴³

This song title repeats as part of the chorus and quotes Luke 2:14, “Glory to God in the highest.” Such a chorus clearly demonstrates the Union believed they worked for the glory of God. A line says, “Here over Washington’s grave, in communion, pledging our country to Freedom and Union!” The song’s reference to George Washington brings their continuing to fight for freedom and the Union into its historical context. The biblical allusion shows that the soldiers believed their actions in the Civil War brought God glory. Another line says, “home of the exile and stranger: Peace be on earth! Peace be on earth! Good will to men—out of Liberty’s birth.” This line is a quotation from the latter half of Luke 2:14, where angels finish proclaiming the birth of Jesus to shepherds. The song’s desire is similar, only here the peace comes as a result of the birth of liberty. The textual allusion demonstrates an interrelating of Christ, peace, liberty, and the working of the Union to bring about freedom. The Union soldiers believed their fight for liberty glorified God and would result in peace like the peace that came with the birth of Jesus.

“The Soldier’s Prayer”⁴⁴

Earlier, the borrowed biblical language section discussed “The Soldier’s Prayer,” but there is one unique occasion in which the song is alluding to a specific text. As said before, the song is a Union soldier’s prayer asking God to protect and provide courage for the fight. Part of this prayer is that God will keep them safely in “the hollow of thy hand.” This phrase occurs once in the Bible, in Isaiah 40:12, where God is known as the one who “measured out waters in the hollow of his hand.” Isaiah

⁴³ E.A. Parkhurst and A. J. H Duganne, *Glory to God in the Highest!* (New York: Horace Waters, 1865) Notated Music.

⁴⁴ Dunbar, *The Soldier’s Prayer*.

uses this phrase to describe the expanse of God's power. It has already been demonstrated how God's character brought confidence to the soldiers, knowing that whether they lived or died, He kept them safe. This textual allusion seems to reinforce this observation. The soldier's source of hope and confidence came from the person and power of God. They believed they could boldly act because God kept them safe in his hand.

"A Nation's Trust in God"⁴⁵

This song is associated with the Union and describes God as the one who reigns and judges above all. The goal and mission of the Union is to "save their native land" and to regain the once "sacred peace" among the North and South. The emphasis is preserving the Union. A lot could be said about the lyrics, but there is one particular textual allusion of interest. The song addresses the "Majesty on high" in whom they trust. This phrase only occurs once in the Bible, in Hebrews 1:3. The first few verses of Hebrews describe the Son of God, Jesus Christ, His nature, and His current place "on the right hand of the Majesty on high." The "Majesty on high" depicts God the Father, as the reigning God the soldiers can trust. The soldiers hope in the day when the land again is blessed like "days before." As the soldiers fought to preserve the Union, their hope was grounded in a powerful God who ultimately reigned over the nation.

"To Canaan"⁴⁶

The first verse of this song discusses the flag that the Union fought for, the one for which their fathers shed blood in the Revolutionary War. The song declares, "What God has woven in his loom, let no one man rend in twain!" This is a textual allusion to Jesus' teaching in Mark 10:9 and Matthew 19:6, where He tells the crowds that what God binds together, let no one separate. Jesus is answering questions of marriage and divorce that the Pharisees asked Him a few verses earlier. The song takes this affirmation Jesus makes about the firmness of marriage and applies it to the nation of America, claiming that God has woven it together and it should not be undone. The soldiers believed the Union had been established through divine means—the South would not win because God desired the Union to remain.

Another occasion of a textual allusion occurs in verse two with the hypothetical question, "what Captain leads your armies?" The answer is "The Mighty One of Israel, His name is Lord of Hosts." This is a near exact quotation of Isaiah 1:24 where the Lord is said to be "the Lord of hosts, the mighty One of Israel." The context of the Isaiah verse is the Lord saying that He will destroy His enemies and those who transgressed against Him. The soldiers referring to this label of God shows not only that God was involved in the Civil War, but that His character was one to lead armies and avenge His enemies. They believed God Himself guided the Union.

"Battle Hymn of the Republic"⁴⁷

Perhaps the most well-known Civil War song, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," contains several instances of textual allusion. The first verse imagines that the author has seen "the glory of the coming of the Lord," which is an allusion to texts like James 5:8, which describe the second coming

⁴⁵ S. Lasar and Cynthia Bullock, *A Nation's Trust in God*, (New York: Firth, Pond & Co., 1861) Notated Music.

⁴⁶ Eben A. Kelly, *To Canaan*, (Providence: Clapp & Cory, 1862) Notated Music.

⁴⁷ Julia Ward Howe, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, (Boston: Oliver Ditson & CO., 1861) Notated Music.

of Jesus Christ and His judgment of the earth. This song elaborates on that theme by describing the coming of the Lord with lightning and storm. The song declares that the main force is God's truth "marching on." Alone, this does not connect to the immediate historical context of the Civil War. But later in the song, there is a call to "die to make men free." The following section will revisit the song because of its narrative allusions, but the textual allusions do show the soldiers acknowledged God was active in the world and worthy of praise.

Narrative Allusions

Given the method and definition of narrative allusions as references to specific stories within the biblical text, this section will analyze songs and hymns to demonstrate the religious interpretation of the Civil War.

"Jehovah Our Deliverer"⁴⁸

The Union talks about the Lord's role on their side of the war through these lyrics. This song makes narrative allusions from the general biblical storyline of how God interacts with the nation of Israel. The lyrics declare, "Had not the Lord, may Israel say, on Israel's side engaged, the foe had quickly swallow'd us." The song claims that as God intervened on the side of Israel, so He will side with them. The soldiers say, "Secure in God's almighty name, our confidence remains." The song also claims that God is the God who "made both heaven and earth," which alludes to God creating the world in Genesis 1-2. These two narrative allusions place the Civil War within the context of God working on behalf of the nation of Israel. The Union relied on God to fight for them as He had fought for Israel.

"Where is Our Moses"⁴⁹

The chorus asks, "Where is our Moses that once was to be! Here now we stand by the deep 'Red Sea,' O who'll lead us thro' unto sweet liberty!" This is a clear allusion to the story of God using Moses to lead the nation of Israel out of Egypt through the Red Sea (Exodus 14-15). The song frames this biblical allusion as if they are waiting for such a deliverer to lead them to safety, victory, and liberty. The language seems to suggest the soldiers did not just hope that such a leader would come, they assumed one would. The allusion connects the Union's hope for victory in the Civil War to the hope of Israel to be led out of slavery in the Old Testament.

"Battle Hymn of the Republic"⁵⁰

This song includes one verse in particular that links the biblical narrative to the cause of the Civil War. Verse five says, "In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea, with a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me: As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free, while God is marching on." The song alludes to the death of Jesus Christ in the New Testament and claims a parallel mission. As Jesus died for a greater purpose, so will the North. The result of Christ's death was to make men holy, and the result of their deaths will be to make slaves free. The song elevates the current struggle by casting an eternal significance on the Union's efforts. This verse is

⁴⁸ Wm. A. King, *Jehovah Our Deliverer*, (New York: Wm. A. Pond & Co. 1863) Notated Music.

⁴⁹ J.H. McNaughton, *Where is our Moses*, (Boston: Oliver Ditson & Co. 1866) Notated Music.

⁵⁰ Howe, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*.

also worded as a call to action. The lyrics call the listener to join the cause and fight to make men free. The mission of Jesus Christ encouraged the Union to fight to free slaves.

“Glory to God in the Highest!”⁵¹

In addition to its textual allusions, this song also includes narrative allusions. For example, the first verse rehearses Israel’s history, explaining how God brought Israel out of “bondage” through the Red Sea, Edom, and Jordan. These narratives are found in the books of Exodus and Numbers. However, the song also says, “up to the land of His promise we’ve trod,” framing the work of God with Israel as work that the writer of the song identifies with. The effect of this narrative allusion is similar to that in the song “Where is Our Moses.” The allusion shows the Union identified with the nation of Israel, hoping in God to deliver them in the war.

“Army Hymn”⁵²

This hymn is written as a prayer to God that asks Him to strengthen and guide the Union. The song also claims that “[God’s] power has made our Nation free; to die for her is serving [Him].” The song clearly relates fighting for the Union with serving the Lord. The song also uses a narrative allusion about the Lord’s guidance. The song asks God to “be Though a pillared flame... and when the battle thunders loud, still guides us in its moving cloud.” In Exodus, God led the nation of Israel through the wilderness by a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of cloud by day. Exodus 14 also describes the Egyptians fearing the pillar of God’s presence with the nation of Israel, seeing it as a sign that God fights for them. The song draws from this narrative, especially when it says, “Sovereign Lord, in Thy dread name we draw the sword.” The narrative allusion shows that the soldier’s hoped in God to be with and guide them like he did with the Israelites in the Old Testament. The Union fought in the name of God and expected Him to lead them to victory.

“To Canaan”⁵³

In addition to its textual allusions, this song also includes a substantial narrative allusion that spans its entire fourth verse.

What song is this you’re singing!
The same that Israel sung
When Moses led the mighty choir,
And Miriam’s ‘timbrel rung!
The priests and maidens cried;
To Canaan! To Canaan!
The people’s voice replied.
To Canaan! To Canaan!
The Lord has led us forth,
To strike up the captive’s chain
The hammers of the North!

⁵¹ Parkhurst and Duganne, *Glory to God in the Highest!*

⁵² Otto Dresel and Oliver Wendell Holmes, *Army Hymn*, (Boston: G. D. Russell, 1863) Notated Music.

⁵³ Kelly, *To Canaan*.

The verse is introduced by a hypothetical question asking what song the North is singing. The song claims that it is the same song from Exodus 15 after God led Moses and the nation of Israel out of Egypt and through the Red Sea to escape slavery. The song summarizes the content of Moses' song as "To Canaan! To Canaan!" Exodus 15:1-21 talks about the work of God to deliver Israel and guide them into the "place, O LORD, which thou has made for thee to dwell in" (15:17). In the last three lines, this song connects to the song in Exodus by claiming that the Lord guides the soldiers as He guided Israel, to "strike up the captive's chains." The focus of this song is on the Lord leading the North to fight to free the slaves. Interestingly, the song in Exodus comes after God Himself freed the slaves. "To Canaan" uses this narrative allusion to reframe the song as one that motivates the Union to free the captives. Because God had freed the Israelites back in Exodus, the Union confidently fought to end slavery during the Civil War.

"The Cross of the South"

Most of this song's second verse alludes to various biblical narratives. "How peaceful and blest was America's soil," the song claims, "'till betrayed by the guile of the Puritan demon, which lurks under virtue and springs from its coil to fasten its fangs in the life-blood of freeman! Then boldly appeal to each heart than can feel and crush the foul viper 'neath Liberty's heel!" This image of the devil being crushed by a heel is borrowed from Genesis 3:15, where God curses the serpent. The Genesis prophecy is then fulfilled in Jesus Christ when he dies and resurrects, defeating Satan. The song reassigns the characters in this biblical narrative to those in the Civil War. It ascribes the role of the demon and viper to the North and the task of crushing the demon's head to the South. The North is said to have betrayed the South and fed on "freemen." The appeal then is for the South, "Liberty," to crush the North. This is one of the most elaborate and lengthy narrative allusions in these songs. It does not simply call on God to act similarly to how he did in the past. It takes a narrative text from the Bible and reassigns the characters, the devil and the victor, to the two sides of the Civil War. The South viewed themselves as the savior, called to vanquish the North, the epitome of evil.

Conclusion

The use of biblical language in Civil War era songs and hymns demonstrates the soldiers on both sides interpreted the war through a religious perspective. They used borrowed biblical language to show belief in a God who is intimately involved with the world and intervenes on behalf of His people to bring about justice and vengeance. The Union believed freeing the slaves related to the liberty described in the Old Testament. The Confederacy identified their mission as a "cross," a divine mission connected to Jesus Christ. Both sides found their confidence in God fighting for them and identified as morally right. These songs also use textual allusions to specific verses in the Bible to further emphasize their hope and confidence was in the character of God. Lastly, the songs use narrative allusions to identify with the characters and roles in the biblical narrative. The Confederacy saw their opposition to the North as equivalent to Christ conquering the devil. The Union saw their freeing of the slaves as equivalent to God rescuing the nation of Israel from slavery. Both sides made some of the same religious claims and held the same confidence in God. This religious interpretation appears in Civil War era songs and hymns through borrowed biblical vocabulary and textual and narrative allusions.

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